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RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 4876
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 2122
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 2203
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 4317
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 4759
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 9349
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 000054

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: MASISTAS TURN VIOLENT, COCHABAMBA PREFECT ATTACKED

REF: A. 2006 LA PAZ 3301

[1](#)B. 2006 LA PAZ 3457

Classified By: Acting ECOPOL Chief Brian Quigley for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) On January 8, Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) militants protesting for the resignation of Cochabamba's prefect (governor) attacked the prefect's building, resulting in at least twenty-two people injured, assaults on several journalists, significant damage to the prefecture's property, and the destruction of two cars and several small businesses. Cocaleros and peasant farmers sympathetic to the MAS had been protesting in front of the prefecture demanding Prefect Manfred Reyes Villa's resignation since January 4. Prefect Reyes argues that MAS Senator Omar Fernandez, who was with the demonstrators on January 8, is responsible for the attacks. Both President Morales and Vice President Garcia Linera, while never condoning the violence, laid blame for the attacks on Prefect Reyes' calls for a new autonomy referendum. The GOB's actions leading up to and on January 8 are reminiscent of the December 5 attack on hunger-strikers in La Paz's San Francisco Church (reftel A). In both cases, the GOB urged its protesters to encircle the opposition, the police initially provided protection, the GOB eventually withdrew police protection thereby unleashing the protesters to violently attack their target. End Summary.

Events Leading Up to January 8

[1](#)2. (U) Cocaleros and peasant farmers sympathetic to the MAS had been protesting since January 4 in the Plaza 14 de Septiembre in front of the prefecture demanding that Prefect Manfred Reyes Villa resign. MAS supporters say their grievance with Prefect Reyes stems from a December 14, 2006 rally in which Reyes announced his support for Santa Cruz's autonomy movement and called for a new referendum on Cochabamba's autonomy. (Note: Cochabamba voters, via a democratic referendum, rejected autonomy in July 2005. End Note). In response to Reyes' call for a new referendum,

President Morales, other GOB officials, and local MAS leaders issued statements that Manfred Reyes was working for the Santa Cruz oligarchs and not for the good of Cochabamba and encouraged their sympathizers to march on the prefecture. MAS supporters held a counter-rally on December 19 which erupted into violence after someone threw tear gas (reftel B). On December 20, the MAS sympathizers agreed to renew their pressure on Reyes starting January 4.

Chronology of the Violence

13. (U) At 12:30 PM January 8, MAS protesters started throwing rocks at the prefecture building so the police responded with tear gas. (Note: The protesters argue the police launched the tear gas first. End Note). Within minutes of the confrontation, the Minister of Government, Alicia Munoz, stated that the police action was unwarranted and fired the new Chief of Police Wilge Obles, who had been sworn in at 9:00 AM that morning. (Note: The GOB has not publicly confirmed the firing. End Note). Shortly after firing the police chief, the police unit that had been protecting the prefecture building was ordered to leave the Plaza 14 de Septiembre. At 2:00 PM the militants started their second attack, first burning two cars, one belonging to the prefecture and the other a private vehicle. Next they attacked the prefecture building with stones and home-made incendiary devices. Several small kiosks in the plaza were looted and then destroyed. Around 4:00 PM the police returned to the plaza to restore order. Having not accomplished their goal to oust Reyes, the protesters late on January 8 and into January 9 began erecting blockades around Cochabamba to block the main arteries into and out of the city. The protesters state they will maintain the blockade until Prefect Reyes resigns. As of midday January 9, the media was reporting that peasants from around Cochabamba department, especially from Morales' political home base in the Chapare, were marching on the city and had cut off the water supply.

The Injuries and Property Damage

14. (U) Protesters, police officers, innocent bystanders and one child were injured in the violence. Cochabamba's Viedma hospital released that 22 people were injured, but some news reports have claimed up to 32 injuries. According to cocalero leader Julio Salazar, 13 protesters were hurt including a child. Viedma hospital stated it had two severe injuries, one MAS supporter who lost his left eye and a police officer who suffered from a broken arm. News outlets claim that over ten journalists were assaulted during the two attacks. In addition to the cars and kiosks destroyed, much of the prefecture building was burned. Prefect Reyes states that forty percent of the building is destroyed, the electricity is out, and that many important documents were lost.

Reactions

15. (C) Prefect Reyes argues that MAS senator Omar Fernandez, who was with the demonstrators on January 8, is responsible for the attacks. Both President Morales and Vice President Garcia Linera, while never condoning the violence, laid blame for the attacks on Prefect Reyes' calls for a new autonomy referendum. Without referring to Reyes by name, Morales in response to the January 8 events stated that certain prefects support division and confrontation between Bolivians. Garcia Linera called the Prefect's request for a new autonomy referendum a "political provocation." He tempered his comments by stating the violence was unjustified but then expressed that the police's use of force was unacceptable and that the police should be used to "protect the people, not reprimand them." MAS Deputy Edmundo Novillo and President of

the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of congress) argued that Reyes has lost legitimacy and has acted with "arrogance" in his demand for a second autonomy referendum. Human Rights Ombudsman Waldo Albarracin told Emboff that he has both publicly and privately condemned the violence by elements of the protest movement. Albarracin stated that he believes that Reyes was democratically elected and should serve his full term. He added, that just as the prefect was democratically elected, Reyes should respect that Cochabamba voters had rejected the autonomy referendum.

Comment

16. (C) The GOB's actions leading up to and on January 8 are reminiscent of the December 5 attack on hunger-strikers in La Paz's San Francisco Church (reftel A). In both cases, GOB officials urged supporters to march on, surround, and apply pressure on opposition figures. In La Paz and Cochabamba the police initially provided protection and prevented pro-MAS militant attacks. In both situations the GOB (via the Minister of Government, Alicia Munoz) eventually ordered the police to withdraw its protection. As in the hunger-striker case, as soon as the police removed its protection, pro-MAS militants in Cochabamba attacked their intended target. End Comment.
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